DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 732 SO 016 534

AUTHOR Hansel, Bettina; Grove, Neal
TITLE Why an AFS Experience Accelerates Learning and the Growth of Competence. Research Report 25. Revised and Expanded.
INSTITUTION AFS International/Intercultural Programs, Inc., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Adolescent Development; *Competence; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Exchange; Experiential Learning; Individual Development; *International Educational Exchange; International Programs; Outcomes of Education; Program Effectiveness; Secondary Education; Self Esteem; *Student Exchange Programs; Student Improvement; Student Motivation; Study Abroad; *Success

ABSTRACT

The American Field Service (AFS) Impact Study has documented that adolescents in AFS programs show greater increases in learning and competence than could be expected through the normal maturing process. Research findings on how people learn and under what circumstances explain why an AFS experience accelerates learning. For example, it is known that exposure to new things stimulates the senses, which in turn stimulates learning. Because of all their experiences, students become more knowledgeable about the new culture, more competent generally, and, therefore, more self-confident about taking on new challenges in the future. Seeing that people have different solutions to familiar problems, AFS students become better able to generate new options for themselves. Their broadened perspectives allow them to discover new opportunities and try new behaviors. Orientation, counseling, and support from the AFS staff helps students deal productively with the stress of the new environment and, therefore, to gain in competence and self-confidence. Experiential learning compels learners to participate directly in real-life activities and is especially effective in terms of its impact on motivation, memory, and mastery. (RM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED257732

RESEARCH REPORTS

MAY 1984

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Cornelius Lee Grove

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

WHY AN AFS EXPERIENCE ACCELERATES LEARNING AND THE GROWTH OF COMPETENCE

Revised and Expanded: November 1984

SP 016 534

RESEARCH REPORT

25

The Research Department. AFS International/Intercultural Programs, Inc.

The mission of the AFS Research Department is to . . .

- carry out research and evaluation projects that potentially will lead to increased understanding of the nature and impact of AFS exchanges, to improved implementation of AFS programs and operations, and/or to enhanced intercultural learning by AFS participants;

- collect and develop innovative cross-cultural orientation materials and procedures that potentially will improve the quality of the learning experience associated with participation in an AFS program;

- maintain contact with members of the scholarly, educational, and professional communities around the world who are interested in international and intercultural exchange of persons; and

- serve as a consultant to members of the worldwide AFS community with respect to research and evaluation, orientation and training, and other activities as may be appropriate.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

WHY AN A F S EXPERIENCE ACCELERATES LEARNING AND THE GROWTH OF COMPETENCE

by Bettina Hansel and Neal Grove
AFS Research Department

The AFS Impact Study has documented that adolescents on AFS programs show greater increases in learning and competence than could be expected through the normal maturing process. This finding confirms the impressions of many adults who have known young people before and after they have participated in an AFS exchange, or who have been through this experience themselves.

What Occurs During an AFS Homestay Experience

The questions of how people learn and under what circumstances they learn best have been studied by psychologists and educators for a long time. Among their findings lies the explanation for why an AFS experience accelerates learning and the growth of competence.

Exposure to new things. People learn through their senses, but in the ordinary course of life, people see, hear, taste, touch, or smell the same sorts of things they have experienced before. The brain handles this information from the senses in an automatic way; the brain is not stimulated to pay special attention to what the senses are experiencing because little or none of it is new. But the senses of a person in an unfamiliar culture are constantly discovering new information. The ears are hearing strange sounds in the new language. The mouth is tasting new foods. There are unusual textures to feel, and different forms of architecture, vegetation, and animal life to be seen. Most significantly, every day the person is with people who have different values, norms, habits of thought, and patterns of behavior. The brain constantly is being alerted to the newness in the environment, and the body responds physiologically. Scientific experiments have shown that, in situations of stress or heightened stimulation, the pituitary gland releases hormones that activate the adrenal steroids, which in turn stimulate the body-brain system and lead to the development of new proteins in the brain. These proteins appear to be instrumental in both learning and memory.

Feeling competent. Eventually, the new things experienced in the unfamiliar culture become familiar. The need for the body-brain system to be highly alert is reduced as sojourners assimilate the new sensory information into the realm of the familiar. Because of these experiences, sojourners become more knowledgeable about the new culture, more competent generally, and therefore more self-confident. They can more gracefully take on new challenges in the future because they remember their successes in dealing with new information and new

problems in the host culture. A positive attitude and increased confidence seem greatly to augment a person's ability to learn.

New options. Adolescents gain competence through making decisions and solving problems. However, they are more likely to make good decisions and find optimal solutions to their problems if they have an array of options from which to choose instead of one option -- the only one that comes readily to mind. While living in their host countries, AFS students see that people have different solutions to familiar problems, such as how to get food into the mouth, how to socialize children, how to get along with friends, and how to deal with emotions. As AFSers discover more and more new options, they are better able to generate other options; therefore, they have a better chance of making wise decisions not only while they are in the host country, but also wherever they may be after leaving that country.

Being an outsider. As outsiders in the host culture, AFS students are well situated to learn through observation. They often are able to perceive ideas and values in the host culture that are taken for granted by insiders, that is, by host nationals. The AFSers then can compare and contrast these ideas and values with their own. Through this process they are likely to become aware of their own taken-for-granted assumptions, which in turn enables them to broaden their perspectives on life and the world. Because of their broadened perspectives, AFS students discover opportunities to try new behaviors and learn new skills; these new competencies often are useful to a considerable extent for the remainder of their lives.

Social networks. Australian researcher Stephen Bochner has suggested that "culture learning will be a positive function of the number of host culture friends an overseas student has." Other researchers also have found a positive relationship between the amount of contact a visitor has with members of the host culture and the extent to which that visitor acquires new attitudes and ideas about the host culture. AFS programs are designed to provide every opportunity for students to make friends with members of the host society. In particular, by living as members of host families, AFS students necessarily come into close, daily contact with host nationals. Many AFS students also attend school in their host country. In addition to the broadly educational experiences that AFSers have through their sustained contacts with host nationals, they benefit also from the direct instruction given to them about the new language and culture by school friends, teachers, and host family members.

Orientation, counseling, and support. Because the learning that takes place during an intercultural experience depends to a great extent on the person's success in dealing with the new environment, it is important that sojourners be given assistance so that they can be successful and gain competence. AFS programs offer several orientations for all participants to enable them to learn more from their experiences. Research has shown that extensive orientation can lead students to a substantial shift in attitudes. Some individuals need more than orientation, however, to insure that they can deal satis-

factorily with the stress and intense stimulation of the new environment. If too much stress or too intense stimulation is experienced, culture shock (a type of physiological and neurological fatigue) may result, making it impossible for the newcomer to assimilate the new information that is constantly reaching the senses. The individual counseling and support that is available to every AFS student on an as-needed basis is an indication of AFS's commitment to a productive learning experience for each student. In some cases, it is this personal support that enables a student to deal productively with the stress of the new environment and thus to gain in competence and self-confidence.

The Value of Experiential Learning

Students can study a foreign language in school, or while living in a foreign country. They can learn about the customs of other people by listening to classroom lectures, or by trying to practice these customs in their dealings with the people in that other country. In other words, students can learn through "information assimilation" or through **"experiential learning"** -- learning through actual experience. Unlike classroom methods in which knowledge is gained largely through passive listening or reading, experiential methods compel learners to participate directly in "real life" activities, and so to engage themselves physically, socially, and emotionally as well as intellectually in the skill or information to be learned. Many learning theorists believe that experiential learning is especially effective in terms of its impact on motivation, memory, and mastery.

Motivation. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of experiential learning is that motivation to learn is intrinsic. If students are placed in an environment in which they **must** use a foreign language in order to communicate, they will be highly motivated to learn that language. This differs from typical classroom learning, in which motivation for learning usually is extrinsic -- as in grades, for example. Students in classrooms often lack the incentive to learn new information because the value of learning it does not become clear until later when the information actually is put to use. Because experiential learning gives students greater incentive to learn, it is particularly useful in the early stages of learning.

Memory. Another advantage of experiential learning is that the learning that takes place is more easily remembered than in the case of information assimilated in the classroom. Knowledge requires structure to tie it together or it is easily forgotten. Experiential learning uses the sequence of action and consequence as a natural structure. This structure does not necessarily require language or other symbolic representations of information; it is more easily retained since it is based in experience. The student learns in an integrated, holistic fashion rather than through the piece-meal assimilation of bits of information.

Mastery. A third advantage of experiential learning is that the student gains a feeling of accomplishment because a task or skill has been mastered. Students in later stages of learning benefit from experiential methods because their sense of mastery strengthens their self-esteem. Assimilating information taught in a classroom setting seems less likely to give the student the same sense of mastery and personal competence.

Experiential learning is the primary goal of AFS programs. The experiential learning goals of an AFS experience recently have received renewed emphasis in a document produced by participants in our recent Workshop on Intercultural Learning Content and Quality Standards (Quebec, Canada; February, 1984):

> "AFS is committed to intercultural learning. Through AFS programs of all types, people are removed temporarily from their home environments and introduced to differing values, ways of life, and patterns of thought in completely new environments. This experience enables AFS participants to acquire skills, attitudes, and knowledge useful throughout their lives as they attempt to cope sensitively and intelligently with the urgent challenges of the world of tomorrow."

Learning Experientially with AFS

An AFS experience accelerates learning and the growth of competence because program participants are completely immersed over a long period of time in an unfamiliar social and cultural environment. This type of stressful challenge requires the body-brain system to maintain an unusually high state of alertness in order to deal effectively with the many new stimuli that the person is encountering. Physiological changes actually take place as a way of preparing the person to learn and grow in response to the demands of the new environment. The outcome for most people is a stretching of old capacities, a development of new skills, an increase in self-confidence, and an acceleration of the maturing process. AFS provides orientation and support throughout participants' intercultural experiences to help insure that these beneficial changes take place.

Experiential learning characterizes all types of intercultural programs offered by AFS. Participants are able to learn skills and information that they would be unlikely to learn -- or at least to learn as well -- in classrooms. In contrast to the largely passive methods typical of schools, learning experientially with AFS provides participants with greater intrinsic motivation, increased capacity for memory, and a superior sense of mastery.

REFERENCES

Adler, P.S. "The Transitional Experience: An Alternative View of Culture Shock." Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 1975, Vol. 15, No. 4, p. 13.

Bennett, J. "Transition Shock: Putting Culture Shock in Perspective." International and Intercultural Commnication Annual, 1977, Vol. 4, pp. 45-52

Bochner, S. Cultures in Contact: Studies in Cross-Cultural Interaction. Oxford: Pergamon, 1982.

Brislin, R.W. Cross-Cultural Encounters: Face-to-Face Interaction. New York: Pergamon, 1981.

Chickering, Arthur W. "Developmental Change as a Major Outcome." In Morris T. Keeton and Associates (eds.), Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics, and Assessment. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976.

Coleman, James S. "Differences Between Experiential and Classroom Learning." In Morris T. Keeton and Associates (eds.), Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics, and Assessment. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976.

Guthrie, G.M. "A Behavioral Analysis of Culture Learning." In R.W. Brislin et. al. (eds.), Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Learning. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975.

Pearce, J.C. Magical Child. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977.

Schinke, S.P., and L.D. Gilchrist. Life Skills Counseling with Adolescents. Baltimore: University Park Press, 1984.

Sell, D.K. Attitude Change as a Result of Living and Learning in Another Culture. Masters thesis, Kent State University, 1980.

Seyle, H. "On the Real Benefits of Eustress." Psychology Today, March 1978, pp. 60-63+.

Wallace, John A. "Educational Values of Experiential Education." In Donald Batchelder and Elizabeth G. Warner (eds.), Beyond Experience: The Experiential Approach to Cross-Cultural Education. Brattleboro, VT: The Experiment Press, 1977.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE